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Fraternity without equality, and other Conservative ideals

Jonathan Rutherford

Jonathan Rutherford discusses compassionate Conservatism.

In June 2005, when we had just begun the collective discussions leading up to the Compass publication *The Good Society*, an email circulated amongst our group containing a link to a speech by Oliver Letwin, who was then the Conservative Shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The speech was called ‘Conducting Politics as if Beauty Matters’, and the theme was Environmentalism.¹ Drawing on the language of the Romantics, Letwin argued that politicians needed a new vocabulary to talk about the environment. This was an issue that went beyond the merely mechanical. He called for a new political culture in which environmental policy is recognised as being the achievement of beauty. ‘The language of politics needs to reflect the felt experience of the environment as sensations and impressions that are capable of moving us to delight and awe.’

Some would dismiss this kind of ‘love of nature’ as a retreat into aestheticism. But this would be to miss the point. Aesthetic and cultural work is a central task of hegemonic politics. Intellectual knowledge, art, music, image-making, uses of language - these create new forms of consciousness. They can redefine our reality and lead us into new ways of thinking about the world. Letwin’s language, in stark contrast to the Whiggish joylessness of Thatcherism, was an early intimation of a renaissance in Conservative thinking. The Toryism of Burke and Ruskin was making a return.

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In November, a month before his election as leader, David Cameron gave a speech to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations on 'Building a pro-social society'. The speech marked a break with Margaret Thatcher's Hayek-inspired statement that 'there is no such thing as society'. We must restore trust in society, he said, and we must recognise that 'we're all in this together'. A series of rhetorical questions demonstrated the new Conservative sympathy:

How do you help an eighty-eight year old lady in a cold and lonely flat ... who's barely able to walk to the shops and often too frightened to do so anyway ... who needs to navigate the complexity of the benefits system? How do you help a sixteen year old girl who's never had the love and attention from her parents that she deserved? How do you make her understand that she's worth something, that she's special ... and that her value to this world should never be measured by the number of boys she has sex with?

People were complex, their emotional problems were built up over the years. The answer to helping them lay in trusting society. Politicians had to trust people: 'I want my Party to be one that says, loudly and proudly, that there is such a thing as society - it's just not the same thing as the state.'

For the new pro-social Conservatism, the state still remains the impediment to freedom. Power and responsibility must be transferred back from the state. Not just to the individual alone, but to society as well; in particular to the voluntary associations and community groups who know what problems exist and how best to solve them. For change is not just about solving the physical manifestations of crime or deprivation: 'In our country today, there's a sense of spiritual poverty, as well as economic poverty'. There is more to life than money: 'in an age of social fragmentation, where individuals and communities are often turning inwards to themselves, not outwards to each other, I believe that working together for the common good is the way to create a new and inspiring sense of national identity.'

In September 2006, Cameron's special adviser Danny Kruger put intellectual substance to the new Conservatism. Writing in that month's issue of *Prospect*, he argued that while the contest between the two main parties about the respective values of liberty and equality had not disappeared, it was now being contested

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on the ground of fraternity. Liberty and equality were political abstractions, but fraternity was concrete and self-generating. Fraternity was not the function of the state or of the individual, but of society - 'the messy and plural mixture of our personal associations'.

Kruger argues that the mistake of the left is to confuse the state with society, and equality with fraternity. The right disagrees with the idea that 'brothers are equal'. 'What matters to brothers is not their notional equality but their relationship'. Fraternity is about shared memories and a common home. Society is not the state, and fraternity is not just another word for equality. And the Thatcherites were also wrong, in thinking that fraternity would be taken care of by liberty. Fraternity is about the social. Kruger does not say any more about this, but points out that the influence of one's wider group, one's family and neighbourhood, determines one's propensity for good health. The failure of the Labour government lay in the absence of a language of social life. It had abandoned the fraternity of ethical socialism - mutuals, self-help - in favour of central state control. 'As the state takes over the institutions of society, individuals feel less confident in them. Egalitarian intrusions into fraternity are made at the expense of liberal attachments to it.' Starved of liberty, fraternity suffers.

Kruger concludes by asserting that liberty and fraternity are not incompatible. The market relies on the values of trust and reciprocity, the sources of which, Kruger claims, are the family and nation. For Kruger freedom and nationalism - liberty and fraternity - are allies. Liberty needs fraternity - not least because the consequences of Thatcherism have left the Conservatives with the reputation of being society's 'wrecking crew'. But embracing social justice does not mean increasing the power of the state. It means extending the social power of voluntary institutions and social enterprises. 'Trusting people' is about liberty - 'individuals should be trusted to make their decisions for their lives'. 'We're all in it together' is about fraternity and the sphere of belonging. The policy strategy of localism, in which people make decisions about their neighbourhood and where communities can create a sense of belonging, captures the relationship of liberty and fraternity. The third element of the trio - equality - is explicitly rejected.

On becoming leader of the party, Cameron announced the setting up of a number of policy groups to review Conservative political strategy. In July 2007, the Social Justice Policy Group under Iain Duncan Smith published its *Breakthrough*

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*Britain. Ending the costs of social breakdown.*² The report faithfully mirrors Cameron's pro-social Conservatism. It defines the five key 'paths to poverty' - family breakdown, serious personal debt, drug and alcohol addiction, failed education, worklessness and dependency. The solution to these problems is not the welfare state but reinforcing the welfare society. 'At the heart of the Welfare Society is the army of people who, for love of neighbour and community, shoulder the massive burden of care' (p6). A welfare society is not the same as a laissez faire approach, which blames poverty on poor individual choices. But nor does it think that eliminating poverty is solely the job of government. 'Our approach is based on the belief that people must take responsibility for their own choices but that government has a responsibility to help people make the right choices.' The catch phrase of the welfare society is 'shared responsibility', an echo of Tony Blair's welfare reform rhetoric.

In August the Economic Policy Review under John Redwood delivered its report, *Freeing Britain to Compete*.³ Its wide-ranging policy recommendations were dominated by its liberal proposals for £14bn of tax cuts. Inheritance tax should be scrapped, and corporation tax, stamp duty on shares and on property, cut. The threshold of the top rate of income tax should be raised. Redwood, it appeared, was keeping the Thatcherite flame alive. Shadow Chancellor George Osborne extinguished it. He affirmed that inheritance tax would be scrapped or reduced by an incoming Conservative Government. However there would be no overall reductions in taxation. Any tax cuts that were identified would be balanced by tax increases elsewhere, such as green levies. A frisson of tension and dissent was exposing the division between Cameron's new Conservatism and the right wing of the party.

On 13 September, the Quality of Life Policy Group under Zac Goldsmith and John Gummer published its report, *Blueprint for a Green Economy*.⁴ The good society it proclaimed must also be a green society. Borrowing from *The Good Society*, it argued that, despite material progress, the UK seemed to be experiencing a 'social recession'. 'Social cohesion is under increasing strain. Levels of trust, in each other and in our institutions, are dwindling. Rates of mental illness, drug abuse, "binge-drinking", family break-up, and other symptoms of an unhappy society are rising inexorably.' Unlike Duncan Smith, Goldsmith and Gummer were pushing at the limits of the new Conservatism. The market is central to their vision, but not the market alone. 'If markets are not to master us then Governments have to intervene to ensure that they keep their place and remain our servants.' Economic growth 'is

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unsustainable without social justice’.

Blueprint exposed the central contradiction in Cameron’s new Conservatism. To create a sustainable economy and to end the social recession would require an active interventionist state, and the regulation of markets. This was a bridge too far. In contrast to the eulogies for Redwood’s report, the right-wing media responded to the *Blueprint* with contemptuous silence. Dominic Lawson in *The Independent* damned Goldsmith with faint praise, twisting the knife as he remarked: ‘the fact that he is a faithful frequenter of John Aspinall’s casino is nothing to do with his political views’. Cameron found himself with his feet on two boats as they started to drift apart. The opinion polls showed the public unwilling to trust his new caring style of Conservatism. Camilla Cavendish argued in *The Timesonline* (13.9.07), however, that the state of the Conservative Party could not be reduced to a simple battle of Goldsmith and Gummer versus Redwood: ‘The last 18 months have seen an outstanding intellectual turnaround in a party that had previously been hobbled by its single-minded obsession with individualism.’ But the turnaround had now stuck in an internecine struggle over the Party’s future and was threatening to unravel. Luckily for them, Labour came to the rescue.

In October Osborne followed up on Redwood’s proposal and announced that the Conservatives would raise the inheritance tax threshold to £1m. Almost immediately the polls began to shift in Cameron’s favour. Then Brown, after allowing weeks of speculation about a November election, lost his nerve. There would be no election. The following week Alistair Darling, in his pre-Budget Report, announced a plan to double the inheritance tax threshold for couples to £600,000. It was a turning point in the fortunes of both parties.

The inadequacy of Labour

Labour’s response to the Conservative policy review was dismissive. ‘We’ve seen their strategy unfold now’, wrote then Culture Secretary James Purnell in *Progress*. ‘It’s obvious what they are up to. They saw New Labour was popular. They didn’t understand why but they worked out that it was. So they decided to associate themselves with it.’²⁵ Purnell dismissed Cameron for his lack of policies. ‘So, on the environment, Zac Goldsmith told Cameron that the kids liked it. But there’s not a single policy he can actually think of and stick to ... There is a black hole in

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their plans - a £6 billion gap. Their proposals are unfair, unfunded, and unthought through.' His contempt was echoed by Andy Burnham, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury: 'The Tories would have to raise green taxes by eye-watering amounts to meet the tax proposals they have been making in other areas.'

But this criticism was oblivious of Labour's own political crisis. Though Purnell claimed that 'we have a vision of the good society that the Conservatives cannot match', this was precisely what the Labour government did not have. Despite its extraordinary electoral successes, its managerialist and technocratic politics had failed to win it deep popular allegiance. Public sector reform, driven by public choice theory and marketisation, had created dysfunctional cultures of centralised control in which trust had evaporated. A principal line of attack should have been the contradiction between the new Conservatism's social values and its continuing reliance on the market for solutions to the social recession and the ecological crisis. Sir Nicholas Stern had already described climate change as the biggest market failure the world had ever seen. Goldsmith and Gummer owned up to this in their report. Unrestrained, the market, 'will catch till the last fish is landed, drill till there is no more oil, and pollute till the planet is destroyed'. But Labour could not seize on this contradiction because markets are its own blind faith. It had introduced markets or proxy markets into almost every facet of social life. While Labour remained more committed to the state than the Conservatives, its managerialism and centralising instincts allowed the Tories to portray state intervention - which has to be part of any redistributive politics - as an undesirable intrusion into people's lives. By the autumn of 2007, the alliance that had brought Labour to power was disintegrating. What had been popular indifference was hardening into open dislike, even hatred. Meanwhile Cameron had regained control in the Conservative Party, and its intellectual renaissance continued.

Jesse Norman, Chairman of the Conservative Cooperative Movement, and a senior research fellow at the think tank Policy Exchange, continued Kruger's work on fraternity. In *From here to Fraternity* he argued that 'after 54 quarters of unbroken economic growth we are in, not an economic recession, but a serious "social recession". Our society is weakening'.⁶ Beveridge's 'five giants' of illness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want remained, though they were in abeyance: 'However we face two new and rather different problems: a problem of security and a problem of trust.' There was 'a pervasive sense in Britain today that the social ties between us

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are weakening'. Like Kruger, Norman points the finger at the state as the main cause of social malaise. 'The effects of a decade of Labour domestic policy have been to extend and centralise the power of the state, to remove power from individuals and established institutions, and to encourage feelings of deference, dependence and passivity among ordinary people' (p9).

Norman defines the new Conservative agenda: 'Compassionate conservatism seeks social renewal through the devolution of power and responsibility to people and local institutions, through greater personal freedom from bureaucracy and regulation, through breaking-up state monopolies to improve public services and through a renewed emphasis on the rights of the citizen and the rule of law' (p6). The task is to embark on a radical programme designed to address the social recession and restore public trust. The politics of fraternity, with its concern for personal well-being and its recognition of the relational nature of individuals, is the best means for achieving it. Norman differentiates between a 'social fraternity' and a 'personal fraternity'. Adhering to his liberal Conservatism, he favours the latter, which 'implies limited government and a massive empowerment of non-state institutions'. His programme, however, is vague. It includes private social entrepreneurship, performing arts to encourage people off the streets, competitive sports, outdoor exercise, programmes of community public service, benefit reform. He also argues for more apprenticeships, and greater flexibility in post-16 learning.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the new Conservatism as Cameron's opportunistic Clause 4 moment. Rather, it represents a shift away from Thatcherism that retains the critique of the state but acknowledges the value of a stable and integrated society. Because of New Labour's politics of centralised control, this critique of state control strikes a popular chord. And its ethical language of relationships and social life resonates amongst many who in the past would never have considered voting Conservative. In the aftermath of the disastrous May local elections, the government struggled to re-assert itself. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, delivered a challenge: 'In every area we will challenge and scrutinise the Conservative position and expose their determination to protect excellence for the few and oppose our reforms to deliver excellence and opportunity for all.' In a speech to the Fabian Society on 6 May, James Purnell, by now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, called for ideological confidence: 'The Tories are paying lip service to our policies because they know their old answers are

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out of tune.' But both positions are deeply compromised. It is Labour that is failing to deliver greater equality and it is Labour that is increasingly out of tune. Having triangulated rightward on every major social issue, the Government has neither political ideology nor moral authority to exploit the contradiction at the heart of the new Conservatism.

Kruger was right. The Labour government lacks an ethical politics to speak of relationships, or values or even social justice. It is unable to evoke a fraternal culture of care and empathy. Its silence over the super rich has been matched only by its hectoring of Incapacity Benefit claimants. It has no idea about a more democratic way of governing the country. The joys, pleasures and frustrations of everyday life pass it by. Faced with a crisis, it offers to listen. All it will hear is the echo of its own jargon. Cameron is politically astute to focus on the depletion of trust and social feeling and claim the mantle of progressivism. The new Conservatism is confronting the remnants of New Labour with the bankruptcy of its political culture.

Reclaiming fraternity

It is far from certain that Cameron's Conservatism will be able to sustain its own contradictions; and its belief that civil society organisations can take on the role of state institutions threatens its credibility. It is time for the left to take on this new Conservatism - a challenge that cannot be separated from the political and philosophical problems facing post-New Labour social democracy. For a start we need to go back to first principles and challenge the right's attempt to redefine fraternity.

The idea of fraternity goes to the heart of what being human means - what it means to be social. Abraham Maslow defines four needs in life: a feeling of safety, a feeling of belonging, a feeling that we are worth being loved, and the experience of esteem and respect. These needs are social and relational; they cannot be satisfied by an individual in isolation from others. Norman acknowledges the relational nature of the individual. He acknowledges that 'as adults our behaviour is radically affected by the environment and incentives we face'. However, contrary to Norman, fraternity cannot be 'personal'. It exists between people. Without others it can only be an unrequited longing for connection.

Kruger agrees that fraternity is about the social, but he narrowly defines it in the biological relationship of brothers. Fraternity extends beyond family. It is not,

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as he argues, just about shared memories and a common home, nor the imagined community of the nation. It is realised in the reciprocity of friendship. It belongs to women as well as men. Sisterhood too is the experience of self-realisation in a common endeavour. It is the pleasure, even joy, of living with and for others. There is today, particularly in the rich countries of the world, a powerful desire to be true to one's self. As the philosopher Charles Taylor argues, this ethic of self-fulfilment is deep within modern consciousness. But it is social not individualistic. It involves the right of everyone to achieve their own unique way of being human. To dispute this right in others is to fail to live within its own terms. The liberty of making decisions about our own lives, and the fraternity of togetherness, require equality to bind them together.

'For the Conservative party I'm leading' says Cameron, 'social justice is a vital issue'.⁷ But there can be no social justice without the anticipation of equality. Equality is the ethical core of social justice. The Conservatives are wrong to think they can have liberty and fraternity without equality. The new Conservatism sidesteps this dilemma by associating equality with an intrusive central state and the loss of freedom. But fraternity without equality means paternalism - gendered, and defined by the imposition of class rule. Paternalism is a social contract between unequals - a 'shared responsibility' between rulers and ruled. There is no anticipation of freedom, rather the ideal is a moral, organic order of unchanging classes in which each knows their place and duty.

In contrast, the fraternity of socialism is structured into ways of life, in what Paul Ricoeur calls 'just institutions' and what Richard Tawney describes as 'right relationships which are institutionally based'. Its idiom is the equitable distribution of shares and goods between members of a society. It is the freedom to become one's own self in relation to others. The challenge is to imagine and build a democratic state and civil society institutions capable of realising this ethic of equality. The new Conservatism, despite its 'no wealth but life' language, cannot deliver freedom. Its paternalism is the nostalgic longing for the father to rule once more over his familial order.

Notes

1. All speeches referred to can be seen at www.conservatives.com.

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2. Iain Duncan Smith, *Breakthrough Britain. Ending the costs of social breakdown*, Centre for Social Justice, July 2007.
3. John Redwood and Simon Wolfson, *Freeing Britain to Compete*, 17 August 2007, www.conservatives.com.
4. John Gummer and Zac Goldsmith, *Blueprint for a Green Economy*, 13 September 2007, www.conservatives.com.
5. James Purnell, *Progress*, November 2007, www.progressonline.org.uk.
6. Jesse Norman, *From here to fraternity: perspectives on social responsibility*, CentreForum, 2007, www.jessenorman.com.
7. David Cameron, 'Making our country a safe and civilised place for everyone', speech to the Centre for Social Justice, 10 July 2006.

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